Garthwaite, K. "I feel I'm giving something back to society": constructing the 'active citizen' and responsibilising food bank use. Social Policy & Society

Abstract

Food banks and other forms of charitable welfare provision are fast becoming an established feature of the UK social security system. Drawing on over two years of ethnographic observation in a Trussell Trust foodbank in North East England, this paper explores the relationship between the construction of the 'active citizen' and lived experiences of food bank users and volunteers. Findings show how participants' experiences and behaviour challenges popular political and policy narratives that individuals are using food banks because of poor lifestyle choices. The internalisation or rejection of this narrative is then examined, contrasting the different forms of citizenship that arise. Through the significant work that goes into living on a low income, people both aligned with and challenged the ideas underpinning 'active citizenship'.

Keywords: Food bank; 'Big Society'; rhetoric; 'active citizen'; responsibility; volunteer; ethnography

Introduction

Food banks[1] and other forms of charitable welfare provision are fast becoming an established part of the UK social security system, filling the gaps left behind following welfare reform and austerity measures which have become progressively entrenched since 2008. The state is now increasingly directing vulnerable citizens to charitable food provision, whether through food banks, breakfast clubs or soup kitchens (Garthwaite 2016a). Trussell Trust foodbank[2] use remains at a record high with 1.1 million three-day emergency food supplies given to people in crisis in 2015-2016 (Trussell Trust 2016). Despite the persistently rising numbers of people accessing emergency food provision, the government have continually dismissed the links between welfare reform and food bank use (Garthwaite 2016a; Lambie Mumford et al. 2014; Loopstra et al. 2015; Perry et al. 2014). Similar increases in charitable food aid are being experienced elsewhere in Europe and internationally (Pfeiffer et al. 2015; Poppendieck 1998; Silvasti 2015; Tarasuk et al. 2014).

As food bank use has risen in the UK, ministers' responses have shifted towards responsibilising individuals for their food bank use, with a specific focus on poor financial management and ostensibly faulty behavioural practices (Garthwaite 2016a; Wells and Caraher 2014). Conservative councillor Julia Lepoidevin commented that food bank users are "selfish" and suggested they "make

[1] The most well-known charity operating food banks in the UK is the Trussell Trust, a large, national, Christian foodbank franchise which operates a voucher system for people seeking emergency food provisions.

[2] The term 'foodbank' is used when discussing the Trussell Trust network of provision, otherwise 'food bank' is employed throughout.

a conscious decision not to pay their rent, their utilities or to provide food for their children because they choose alcohol, drugs and their own selfish needs" (Elgot 2014). Employment minister Priti Patel described food banks as playing "a vital role in welfare provision" and argued "there is no robust evidence that directly links sanctions and food bank use" (Hansard 2015). Accompanying this rhetoric is a distinct "deepening of personal responsibility" (Patrick 2012) and increased focus on conditionality attached to the government's welfare reform agenda (Dwyer and Wright 2014: 27). Donoghue (2013: 88-89) has commented that ultimately conditionality "implies an active/passive binary whereby citizens are simultaneously in need of empowerment while also being actively responsibilised", an argument which can be applied to the rhetoric and policy measures surrounding increasing welfare conditionality and food bank use in the UK.

This article examines the relationship between political rhetoric, responsibilities, and the 'active citizen' in relation to rising food bank use, beginning with an overview of how food banks were firstly conceptualised through political representations of the 'Big Society' agenda, before a shift in focus towards personal responsibility of those using them. Drawing on the lived experiences of people who have used a foodbank, as well as foodbank volunteers, the findings show how participants' experiences and behaviour questions the political and policy narrative that individuals are using foodbanks because of poor lifestyle choices. Through the significant work that goes into living on a low income, they demonstrate orientations that both align with and challenge the ideas underpinning 'active citizenship'.

Constructing the 'active citizen' in the 'Big Society'

This paper focuses its attention on the growth of food banks and the role of the 'active citizen' within a framework of the 'Big Society' agenda where the state retreats in uneven ways to the detriment of those most precariously positioned, and civil society steps in (Cameron 2009). The 2010 Conservative Party manifesto claimed the 'Big Society' would "redistribute power from the central state to individuals, families and local communities" (Cameron 2010). By promoting social responsibility in this way, it continues, a Conservative government could "rebuild shattered communities and repair the torn fabric of society". The 'Big Society' agenda, then, was offered as a solution to 'Broken Britain': "to heal the wounds of poverty, crime, social disorder and deprivation that are steadily making this country a grim and joyless place to live for far too many people" (Cameron 2008, unpaginated). This rhetoric identifies the welfare state in particular as a driver for social and moral decline in society through the creation of a dependency culture.

When food banks began to gain coverage in the mass media, they were described by the Conservative government as an "excellent example" of active citizenship, with David Cameron suggesting food banks were "part of what I call the Big Society" (Hansard 2012. In 2015, Robert Key, former Conservative MP for Salisbury, and trustee of the Trussell Trust, described food banks as "national volunteering that makes sense". His message regarding food banks was that they were "popular community action...It is, for goodness' sake, the Big Society" (Key 2015). Food banks were therefore viewed as a positive translation of the ideology of the 'Big Society' – a mix of libertarian paternalism and communitarian forms of social solidarity (Ellison and Fenger 2013: 616). Caplan has remarked (2016: 9) on the tensions between and intentions of all actors involved in the 'Big Society':

> "While such examples of voluntarism are lauded by some as examples of the vibrancy of democracy and society, it can hardly go unnoticed that they are also associated with profound changes to the UK welfare state, the discourses of politicians, the policies of the government, and the views of many voters".

However, as research began to link growing food bank use to the failing social security safety net (Lambie-Mumford et al. 2014; Perry et al. 2014) and as being symptomatic of wider structural inequalities (Garthwaite et al. 2015), the provision of emergency food was less readily perceived as a feature of the informal state. Resultantly, government explanations for foodbank use began to focus upon blaming individuals for needing to seek emergency food. A frequent theme of newspaper articles from Conservative politicians characterised people using a food bank as "unable to manage their personal finances, [they are] freeloaders abusing the service the food bank offers or they are opportunistically taking advantage of the burgeoning network of food banks offering free food" (Wells and Caraher 2014: 1436). This resulted in 'food banks themselves becoming more critical of government polices as welfare cuts bit deep' (Wells and Caraher 2014: 1437; Williams et al. 2016). Chris Mould, Chairman of the Trussell Trust (cited in McBain 2015, unpaginated), said:

> "We believe every citizen has a right to enjoy the full benefits of citizenship, which include the ability to clothe yourself, house yourself and feed yourself, and we think it's government's responsibility to ensure that".

At the same time, increasingly, responsibility for welfare has shifted from the state to individual citizens, as well as to linking 'active citizenship' to the longer-term project of reforming and curtailing the welfare state (Kearns 1995: 157). Kisby (2010) has noted that the 'Big Society' draws heavily on Conservative ideas about 'active citizenship' that were developed in the 1980s. Accounts of 'active citizenship' from the early years of the Coalition government emphasised the importance

of the 'Big Society' as voluntarism, at the same time as pursuing a dominant citizenship narrative that valorises paid work (Lister, 2011, Dwyer and Wright, 2014; Patrick 2015). 'Active citizenship', then, has now become almost synonymous with decreasing citizen dependence on social services and other welfare arrangements (Verhoeven and Tonkens 2013: 415), with Kearns (1995: 160) commenting that it accentuates responsibilities rather than rights, and obligations rather than entitlements.

In the UK, welfare reform has had a significant impact upon rising food bank use. The driving structural factors that lead to a Trussell Trust foodbank referral include benefits sanctions, delays, errors, and low-paid, precarious employment (Perry et al. 2014; Lambie Mumford et al. 2014; Garthwaite 2016a; Trussell Trust 2016; Work and Pensions Select Committee 2015). The very existence of food banks, then, suggests that the social rights of citizenship, defined at their most minimal by T.H. Marshall (1950: 8) as the right to a "modicum of economic welfare and security", are currently being denied to many in Britain who are seeking emergency food aid. The policy agenda that led to the growth of food banks serves to marginalise and undermine the citizenship of food bank users who are judged to be "abject" (Tyler 2013) citizens. Wells and Caraher (2014: 1439) found media coverage featured an overreliance on the "good news element" of food bank use, which focused on the hard work of the volunteers at the expense of the voices of people using a food bank. This presents a contrast between the promotion of food bank volunteers as being an active part of the 'Big Society', and an undermining of food bank users through a critiquing of their behaviour.

Research design

This article draws on data from the project 'Local Health Inequalities in an Age of Austerity: The Stockton-on-Tees Study', a five year, mixed methods project examining localised health inequalities in an era of austerity in the town of Stockton-on-Tees, North East England. Stockton-on-Tees has the highest health inequalities in England with life expectancy gaps of 17.3 and 11.4 years amongst men and women respectively between the least and most deprived wards (Association of Public Health Observatories [APHO], 2015). Taking an ethnographic approach to studying health inequalities, weekly volunteering and participant observation began at a Trussell Trust foodbank in November 2013. Once fully trained, the volunteering role included preparation of food parcels; distributing food parcels; liaising with referring agencies; and administration of the vouchers that all foodbank users are required to obtain in order to receive emergency food provision. My identity as a researcher was made known to all foodbank users, volunteers, and staff at referring agencies involved in the research. Volunteering allowed for a detailed insight into the way the foodbank was

used and how it operated. Not only did volunteering demonstrate commitment to 'the cause' and the local area, it also provided a space in which to form relationships that did not solely focus on the researchers' needs and objectives. Instead, importance was shifted towards what the foodbank users and volunteers needed (see Garthwaite 2016b for further details).

Field notes were taken before, during, and immediately after volunteering in the foodbank and included observations, conversations, and reflexive experiences. 82 in-depth interviews with people who used the foodbank (n=60), foodbank volunteers (n=12), and foodbank referrers (n=10) were also carried out. Ten of the 60 foodbank users were then interviewed again in their own homes up to two weeks after the receipt of their food parcel to explore their experiences of the food given. Of the 60 foodbank users interviewed (38 men and 22 women), the age range of the sample varied from 16 to 63 years old. The gender patterning of the sample reflects the wider demographics of people who used the foodbank. Interviews that took place in the foodbank were not digitally recorded, but detailed notes were taken immediately afterwards. Participants were asked to discuss topics relating to: why they came to the foodbank; daily budgeting practices; employment; experiences of social security benefits, including sanctions, appeals, and delays; their health; their local area; and their hopes for the future.

Observational notes and interview transcripts were analysed with the assistance of qualitative data analysis software (NVivo 10). Participation was voluntary, confidential, and secured by either verbal or written informed consent. Data were fully anonymised before thematic analysis was undertaken. The findings of the qualitative interviews were then compared with the observations that had previously been noted. Ethical considerations were respected throughout the research, with the research being approved in advance by Durham University Department of Geography Ethics Committee.

Findings

Constructing and contesting 'active citizenship'

The shift from entitlement to charitable provision brings increased stigma, conditionality, and surveillance for people who are seeking food aid. Silvasti (2015: 478; 480) has commented that "it should be underlined that charity food is never an entitlement, it is a gift" that does not "offer legitimate access to all citizens, equally". This is heightened by the refusal of the state to officially recognise the evidenced extent and causes of food insecurity in the UK. Charity is not offered to social equals, thus recipients remain separate from volunteers in terms of both status and expectations, whilst "social honour accrues to those who volunteer; stigma to those who are clients"

(Poppendieck 1998: 254). Williams et al. (2016: 16-17) have noted how the Trussell Trust have pursued a largely apolitical marketing strategy of their franchise, "which has studiously avoided alignment with any particular political party".

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this leads to a variety of political standpoints amongst volunteers, especially on issues of welfare, poverty, and austerity. The majority of the volunteers at the Stockton-on-Tees foodbank were retired, both men and women in fairly equal numbers, generally became involved with the foodbank because of a desire to help the local community, which often represented an extension of the work they were already involved in within the church. Belinda, 79, had been volunteering at the foodbank with her husband Ronnie, 78, since it opened in June 2013. The internalisation of the 'active citizenship' narrative was found in Belinda's explanations for volunteering, which centred on altruism and connection to the local area:

> "My main reason was because the foodbank was going to be in the church and we're part of the church, and it was a little job I felt I could do, helping the community. Y'know, I think we tend to think that everybody lives the same as we do, but it's difficult when you see the people who come in and the needs of them and you realise they don't".

Simon, 52, was a volunteer at the foodbank on both Wednesdays and Fridays, the two days it opened. He started volunteering after coming out of prison in February 2014, where he had spent ten years for armed robbery. After receiving an initial food parcel from the foodbank, Simon started coming to the church, became a Christian and in the process "got a new family" before becoming a volunteer himself:

> "I know how hard it is. I've been the drinker, I've took the drugs...I enjoy it here cos I feel I'm giving something back to society".

Here, we can see an explicit link to Cameron's articulation of the 'Big Society' and Simon's reasons for becoming a volunteer. In 'giving something back to society', Simon is fulfilling his role as an 'active citizen', thus satisfying his citizenship duties and engaging in self-validation, demonstrating both an internalisation of the 'fecklessness' idea of foodbank users, but also the voluntarism Big Society ideal. For both Belinda and Simon, volunteer labour thus provides an arena for demonstrating social worthiness within discourses of active citizenship (Fuller et al. 2008).

Resisting irresponsibility through 'active unemployment'

The rejection of the dominant narrative surrounding food bank use was found in the perspectives of many of the people who used the foodbank, who were involved in complex daily 'work', such as

tight budgeting practices, skipping meals, caring for children, friends, and family members, and being faced with the decision to 'heat or eat', which is not represented in government characterisations of food bank users as irresponsible and feckless. As Lister (2015) has identified, it is often overlooked how poverty is time consuming and that far from inaction, people on a low income are highly active in simply surviving their poverty, negotiating poor transport links to jobs, shops, and services, poor housing, all of which can negatively impact upon health.

Nonetheless, political rhetoric has focused on people's lack of ability and effort in managing their hunger. At the launch of the 2014 All Party Political Group on Poverty (APPG) report on hunger in Britain, Conservative peer Baroness Jenkin of Kennington claimed people were unaware of how to budget and cook, and suggested that people living in poverty stop avoiding porridge since it only costs four pence per bowl (Holehouse 2014). Rather than an inability to cook or budget, more often it was that people who accessed the foodbank lacked the means to cook because they didn't have an oven, or couldn't afford the electricity to use their microwave. Simon, 52, was a volunteer at the foodbank who had also used the foodbank himself three times previously. He drew attention to his attempts to maintain a healthy and nutritious diet, despite receiving only £146.20 Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) each fortnight due to his paranoia, anxiety, and sciatica:

> "Porridge, pasta, sauces, beans, rice, veg off the market at the end of the day, it's nice to have a pepper in the sauces. Porridge is good cos with porridge you don't need milk. Milk is a luxury. I like a banana but I've had to cut back on them. Biscuits, ice cream, I've cut back on all the luxuries. If I buy a chicken I cut it in half, make a Sunday dinner then make curry with the rest. But I'm not fussed I'll make a vegetarian curry, it's a meal. But realistically can you live like that for any length of time? I doubt it."

People who use a food bank have frequently been criticised both in government rhetoric and the mass media for irresponsible spending habits, which include expensive mobile phones, large screen televisions, tattoos, and dogs (Garthwaite 2016a). Speaking about food bank use in January 2014, former Conservative MP Edwina Currie said:

> "I get very, very troubled at the number of people who are using food banks who think that it's fine to pay to feed their dog, their dog is in good nick and beautiful, but they never learn to cook, they never learn to manage and the moment they've got a bit of spare cash they're off getting another tattoo. We should feel cross about this, all of us" (cited in Bennett 2014, unpaginated).

Anna, 51, came to the foodbank with her 11 year old daughter after anxiety and depression that led to her withdrawing from her job as an administrator for the police. Anna felt the need to actively justify her choice to spend the little money she had on the family greyhounds:

> "With the dogs I'd hate to let them go. We've given them a good home for years but I'm having to buy a cheap bag of pasta and I'm feeding them pasta in with their dog food to make the dog food last further. Even just getting the dog food is a bit of a feat because it's a 15 kilo bag of dog food, which is absolutely the cheapest way to feed them. I went on the bus yesterday for it and there were men on the High Street aghast that I was carrying a 15 kilo bag of dog food and three bags of shopping".

Anna frequently emphasised how she managed her limited budget as a single parent, thus distancing herself from marginalising representations of 'Other' benefits recipients and reinforcing her role as an 'active citizen' despite her unemployed status:

> "I do it all on my own, I maintain the house on my own. It used to be in a much better state than this, I have let things slide recently but my garden's still good, the house is still warm, I'm still managing to pay that side of the bills. A lot of people on benefits seem to be getting more help than me, I can't be the only person struggling like this".

Naomi, 36, had been receiving ESA and Disability Living Allowance (DLA) for five years due to her physical and mental health problems, including arthritis, Irritable Bowel Syndrome (IBS), depression, and anxiety. Responding to criticism of people using foodbanks for making 'bad' choices, she said:

> "Well, I am a smoker myself but I use rolling tobacco, I don't smoke indoors and it costs me £8 a fortnight for me and Kev to smoke. It's got nothing to do with smoking, nothing to do with smoking. I dunno how they can use that as an excuse, they are trying to blame certain things as an excuse and it's not, it annoys me. And what bugs me is half of the government, the parliament smoke, they drink every day, seven days a week. [I'd say] Go without a drink, go without a fag for a week, see how you get on."

These experiences and behaviours show a resistance to the critique of food bank users as passive and irresponsible, challenging the dominant narrative surrounding food bank use and 'active citizenship'. Instead, participants emphasised an alternative form of citizenship through their 'active unemployment' status, which demonstrates a commitment to the idea that in practice paid work is the route to valorised citizenship (Patrick 2012).

Conclusions

This paper has explored the relationship between the construction of the 'active citizen' and lived experiences of foodbank use in the UK. The findings here highlight the delicate balance between emergency food provision and the welfare state. As welfare is increasingly delivered through the voluntary sector, being a 'failed' or abject (Tyler 2013) citizen carries a greater stigma than it has done previously, particularly if we contrast the narrative surrounding being a foodbank volunteer with that of a food bank user. These developments not only serve to undermine social rights of citizenship for foodbank users but also reinforce inequalities of status between 'active citizens', 'deserving welfare claimants' and 'failed' or "abject" citizens (Tyler 2013). The stigma attached to foodbank use means, in order to attain charitable provisions, users become necessarily involved in a process that actively denies their equal citizenship and status. Accordingly, it is necessary for people accessing emergency food aid to deny their equal citizenship and status in order to ask for and attain charitable provisions.

International research suggests that charity in the form of food banks and food aid is highly depoliticising. Riches (2002) and Poppendieck (1999) have argued that food aid allows the public to consider that 'something is being done', which then appears to prevent the need to investigate the real reasons for food poverty. Riches (2002) has argued that there can be little doubt that food banks in Canada today enjoy broad government, business and media support and a high degree of public legitimacy. They have become key institutions in the newly resurrected residual welfare state with governments relying on them as charitable partners providing feeding programmes of last resort. Writing in an American context, Poppendieck (1999) described food banks as a "moral safety valve" which "reduce[s] the discomfort evoked by visible destitution in our midst by creating the illusion of effective action and … normalizes destitution and legitimates personal generosity as a response' to injustice, rather than encouraging systemic change". Whilst referring to emergency food provision in America, visible comparisons can be drawn within a UK context.

The food bank setting can seen as both a public and political space through which citizenship status, and rights and responsibilities are negotiated, resulting in subtle but important shifts in the construction and contestation of 'active citizenship'. People gained status and worth through 'active unemployment', which was made up of volunteering, domestic work, and management of everyday poverty, challenging their positioning as non-contributory citizens, as recognised by Fuller et al. (2008: 163). A rejection and resistance to being labelled as the 'Other' was maintained through an emphasis on these alternative practices that are less commonly recognised as being integral to being a contributing and non-dependent member of society.

Equally, the findings have shown how as the citizenship rights of people seeking charitable food aid are being eroded, responsibilities are being extended. Fulfilling the role of 'active citizen' in the context of the 'Big Society' can intensify many of the feelings of shame and inadequacy that low income citizens internalise. For example, increasingly delivering welfare 'rights' and related services via the voluntary sector means that 'welfare' comes to be viewed as synonymous with 'charity' (in the pejorative sense) and therefore becomes a handout. Kisby (2010: 490) has suggested the ideas that form the basis of the 'Big Society' can be perceived as either "essentially empty" or, at worst, "dangerous", due to its adherence to a "a genuine belief that charities and volunteers, rather than the state, can and should provide numerous, core public services". As charity is not offered to social equals, people using a food bank remain separate from volunteers in terms of status, choice, and placement within the panacea of the 'Big Society'. As the findings here show, this is then tied into political representations of growing food bank use, and the wider responsibilisation of the 'active citizen' in foodbank Britain.

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